Chile declares emergency as wildfires kill 15

SANTIAGO: Wildfires burning out of control in southern Chile have killed at least 15 people and forced more than 50,000 to evacuate, the government said on Sunday.

Security Minister Luis Cordero gave the tolls for 14 blazes burning for two days now in the Nuble and Biobio regions about 500 kilometers (300 miles) south of Santiago.

President Gabriel Boric declared a state of emergency as nearly 4,000 firefighers battled flames fueled by gusting winds and hot weather in the southern hemisphere summer. "We face a complicated situation," Interior Minister Alvaro Elizalde said.

The president announced the state of emergency in Nuble and Biobio in a post on the social media platform X. "All resources are available," Boric wrote.

Among other things, the declaration means the armed forces will now get involved.

Alicia Cebrian, the director of the National Service for Disaster Prevention and Response, said most of the evacuations were in the Biobio towns of Penco and Lirquen, which have a combined population of around 60,000 people.

Matias Cid, a 25-year-old student who lives in Penco, described fast-moving flames burning through the night and devouring homes.

"We had to leave with the shirts on our back. If we had stayed another 20 minutes we would have burned to death," Cid said.

All but one of the fatalities so far were in Penco, its mayor Rodrigo Vera said. Lirquen, a small port town, was also hit hard, with many people saving themselves by rushing to the beach, said resident Alejandro Arredondo, 57.—AFP

AN aerial view of the remains of burned vehicles after a wildfire in Concepcion.—AFP

Cops killed in Guatemala as gang violence erupts

GUATEMALA CITY: Violence broke out in parts of Guatemala on Sunday morning after Guatemalan security forces regained control of a prison that had been taken over by inmates, and took a top gang leader into custody, the country's civil police agency said.

Authorities regained control over Renovacion 1, near the southern town of Escuintla, one of the three prisons where inmates rioted and took hostages on Saturday, demanding greater privileges for their gang leader.

The agency also said authorities had subdued Aldo Duppie, alias El Lobo, widely reported as the top leader within the Barrio 18 gang.

Images provided by the civil police showed officers escorting El Lobo, who appeared to have a bloody shoulder, out of the prison.

Shortly afterward, simultaneous attacks against police officers broke out in and around the capital of Guatemala City. At least seven police officers have been killed in various attacks, while one gang member has been killed, Interior Minister Marco Antonio Villeda told reporters on Sunday. Ten police officers have been injured. The minister said the government would not negotiate with gang members.—Reuters

Iraq announces complete withdrawal of US-led forces

BAGHDAD: Iraq said on Sunday US-led coalition forces had finished withdrawing from bases within the country's federal territory, which excludes the autonomous northern Kurdistan region.

"We announce today... the completion of the evacuation of all military bases and leadership headquarters in the official federal areas of Iraq of advisers" of the US-led coalition, the military committee tasked with overseeing the end of the coalition's mission said.

With the withdrawal, "these sites come under the full control of Iraqi security forces", it said in the statement, adding that they would transition to "the stage of bilateral security relations with the United States".

The vast majority of coalition forces had withdrawn from Iraqi bases under a 2024 deal between Baghdad and Washington outlining the end of the mission in Iraq by the end of 2025 and by September 2026 in the Kurdistan region.

US and allied troops had been deployed to Iraq and Syria since 2014 to fight the militant Islamic State group, which had seized large swathes of both countries to declare their so-called "caliphate".

The jihadist group was territorially defeated in Iraq in 2017 and in Syria in 2019, but continues to operate sleeper cells.

The vast majority of coalition troops withdrew from Iraq over previous stages, with only advisers remaining in the country.

Anti-IS operations

The military committee said Iraqi forces were now "fully capable of preventing the reappearance of IS in Iraq and its infiltration across borders".

"Coordination with the international coalition will continue with regards to completely eliminating IS's presence in Syria," it added.

It pointed to "the coalition's role in Iraq offering cross-border logistical support for operations in Syria, through their presence at an airbase in Erbil", the capital of Iraq's Kurdistan region. In December, two US soldiers and a civilian interpreter were killed in Syria in an attack blamed on IS, sparking fears of a resurgence in the country.

The statement added that anti-IS operations would be coordinated with the coalition through the Ain al-Assad base in Anbar province in western Iraq.

IS attacks in Iraq have massively declined in recent years, but the group maintains a presence in the country's mountainous areas.

A UN Security Council report in August said: "In Iraq, the group has focused on rebuilding networks along the Syrian border and restoring capacity in the Badia region."

Withdrawal agreement

Washington and Baghdad agreed in 2024 to wind down a US-led coalition fighting the militant Islamic State group in Iraq by September 2025, with US forces departing bases where they had been stationed. However, a small unit of US military advisers and support personnel remained.

Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani said that the agreement originally stipulated a full pullout of US forces from the Ain al-Asad air base in western Iraq by September. But "developments in Syria" since then required maintaining a "small unit" of between 250 and 350 advisers and security personnel at the base.

Now all US personnel have departed.

Iraqi Army Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Abdul Amir Rashid Yarallah oversaw the assignment of tasks and duties to various military units at the base on Saturday following the withdrawal of US forces.—Agencies

Trump returns to Davos after unleashing avalanche on global order

WASHINGTON: Donald Trump returns to the Davos ski resort next week after unleashing yet another avalanche on the global order. But for the US president, his main audience is back home.

Trump's first appearance in six years at the gathering of the world's political and global elite comes amid a spiraling crisis over his quest to acquire Greenland. Fellow leaders at the mountain retreat will also be eager to talk about other shocks from his first year back in power, from tariffs to Venezuela, Ukraine, Gaza and Iran.

Yet for the Republican president, his keynote speech among the Swiss peaks will largely be aimed at the United States.

US voters are angered by the cost of living despite Trump's promises of a "golden age," and his party could be facing a kicking in crucial midterm elections in November.

That means Trump will spend at least part of his time in luxurious Davos — a place where leaders can easily look out of touch with ordinary people — talking about US housing.

A White House official said that Trump would "unveil initiatives to drive down housing costs" and "tout his economic agenda that has propelled the United States to lead the world in economic growth." The 79-year-old is expected to announce plans allowing prospective homebuyers to dip into their retirement accounts for down payments.

Billionaire Trump is keenly aware that affordability has become his Achilles' heel in his second term. A CNN poll last week found that 58 percent of Americans believe his first year back in the White House has been a failure, particularly on the economy.

Trump's supporters are also increasingly uneasy about the "America First" president's seemingly relentless focus on foreign policy since his return to the Oval Office. But as he flies into the snowy retreat, Trump will find it impossible to avoid the global storm of events that he has stirred since January 20, 2025.

A PERSON holds a placard during a protest ahead of the opening of the World Economic Forum in Davos.—Reuters

Trump will be alongside many of the leaders of the same European Nato allies that he has just threatened with tariffs if they don't back his extraordinary quest to take control of Greenland from Denmark.

Those threats have once again called into question the transatlantic alliance that has in many ways underpinned the western economic order celebrated at Davos.

'Economic stagnation'

So have the broader tariffs Trump announced early in his second term, and he is set to add to the pressure on Europe in his speech. Trump will "emphasize that the United States and Europe must leave behind economic stagnation and the policies that caused it," the White House official said. The Ukraine war will also be on the cards.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is hoping for a meeting with Trump to sign new security guarantees for a hoped-for ceasefire deal with Russia, as are G7 leaders.

But while the largest-ever US Davos delegation includes Secretary of State Marco Rubio, special envoy Steve Witkoff and son-in-law Jared Kushner, who have all played key roles on Ukraine, no meeting is assured.

"No bilateral meetings have been scheduled for Davos at this time," the White House said. Trump is meanwhile reportedly considering a first meeting of the so-called "Board of Peace" for war-torn Gaza at Davos, after announcing its first members in recent days.

Questions are also swirling about the future of oil-rich Venezuela following the US military operation to topple its leader Nicolas Maduro, part of Trump's assertive new approach to his country's "backyard." But Trump may also pause to enjoy his time in the scenic spot he called "beautiful Davos" in his video speech to the meeting a year ago.—AFP

Shark mauls boy in Sydney Harbour

SYDNEY: A shark mauled a boy swimming in Sydney Harbour on Sunday, leaving him in a critical condition with serious leg injuries, authorities said.

The predator bit the boy, believed to be about 13 years old, during the late afternoon off Shark Beach, New South Wales state police said. "The injuries are consistent with what is believed to have been a large shark," police said in a statement.

Officers pulled the boy from the water off the harbour beach within minutes of being alerted to the incident, police said.

They gave the boy first aid for "serious" leg injuries while he was aboard a police boat, applying two medical tourniquets.

Paramedics transported him to Sydney Children's Hospital, where he was said to be in a critical condition. "Swimmers are advised to avoid entering nearby waters at this time," police said. Shark Beach, in Sydney's eastern suburb of Vaucluse, was closed and police evacuated nearby beaches in the harbour, the state government said.

Wildlife experts were working to identify the shark species involved, it said in a statement.

"This is a tragic shark attack on a young boy having a swim on a Sunday afternoon near a harbour beach in Sydney's east," New South Wales Agriculture Minister Tara Moriarty said.

"Our thoughts are with the young boy and his family. I understand there were also other young people with him at the time of the attack, our thoughts are also with them." There have been more than 1,280 shark incidents around Australia since 1791, of which more than 250 resulted in death, according to a database of the predators' encounters with humans. Increasingly crowded waters and rising ocean temperatures that appear to be swaying sharks' migratory patterns may be contributing to a rise in attacks despite overfishing depleting some species, scientists say.—AFP

Avatar: Fire and Ash at number one for fifth straight week

LOS ANGELES: *Avatar: Fire and Ash* showed no signs of slowing down, topping the North American box office for the fifth consecutive week over the long holiday weekend, industry estimates showed on Sunday.

The third installment in director James Cameron's blockbuster fantasy series took in another $17.2 million from Friday to Monday, when Americans mark Martin Luther King Jr Day.

That put its US and Canadian haul at $367.4 million, and its worldwide total at more than $1.3 billion, according to *Exhibitor Relations*.

***Fire and Ash* stars Zoe Saldana as Na'vi warrior Neytiri and Sam Worthington as ex-Marine Jake Sully, who must battle a new foe threatening their family's life on the planet Pandora.**

It is the fourth Cameron film to pass the $1 billion mark, along with the first two *Avatar* films and *Titanic*. Debuting in second place with a disappointing $15 million was "28 Years Later: The Bone Temple," the fourth installment in the zombie horror series, which comes less than a year after the last film.

"Returning after 7 months is quick — it's too quick, and it's hurting the numbers," Said analyst David A. Gross of Franchise Entertainment Research.

Disney's feel-good animated film *Zootopia 2* showed its staying power, moving up to third place at $12 million over the four-day weekend.

In fourth place at $10.2 million was *The Housemaid*, an adaptation of Freida McFadden's best-selling novel about a young woman who is hired by a wealthy couple with dark secrets. Sydney Sweeney and Amanda Seyfried star in the Lionsgate release.

***Marty Supreme*, starring Oscars frontrunner Timothee Chalamet as a conniving 1950s table tennis player with big dreams, finished in fifth place at $6.7 million. Rounding out the top 10 are: *Primate* ($6 million) *Greenland 2: Migration* ($3.9 million) *Anaconda* ($3.8 million) *The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePants* ($3.0 million) *No Other Choice* ($2.7 million).—AFP**

PM Shehbaz invited to join Gaza 'Board of Peace'

Continued from Page 1

and effective international peace-building body" chaired by Donald Trump himself.

The board would start by addressing the Gaza conflict and then be expanded to deal with other conflicts, According to the charter's copy seen by *Reuters*.

While US officials said planning has focused on the Israel-Hamas conflict, discussions are underway to expand the board's reach to other hotspots, including Ukraine and Venezuela.

Membership cost

The administration is soliciting memberships from approximately 60 nations. According to a draft charter cited by *Reuters*, countries must pay $1billion to secure permanent membership.

Nations that do not pay the fee would be limited to three-year terms, subject to renewal by the chairman. The White House disputed reports regarding a mandatory fee, calling them "misleading".

"This simply offers permanent membership to partner countries who demonstrate deep commitment to peace, security, and prosperity," the White House said in a statement on the social media platform X.

Meanwhile, former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, who's now serving on the board's executive panel, has avoided aligning with Trump's $1bn call. According to a report by *Bloomberg*, Blair's office said he would not publicly back this proposal, adding that further questions about the fee should be directed to the Trump administration.

Trump's powers

The draft charter grants broad executive authority to Trump and allows him to serve as chairman indefinitely, subject only to voluntary resignation or removal due to incapacity confirmed by a unanimous board vote.

The document gives the chairman the authority to appoint and remove member states — decisions that would require a two-thirds majority vote to overturn. According to the text, Trump would hold effective veto power over board decisions. The charter states rulings will be "made by a majority of the member states present and voting, subject to the approval of the chairman".

It also grants him the "exclusive authority to create, modify, or dissolve subsidiary entities" to fulfill the board's mission.

The charter critiques current international structures and advocates for pragmatic judgement, common sense, and courage to abandon often ineffective methods and institutions for lasting peace.

Diplomatic backlash

The proposal has drawn sharp caution from European capitals and concern from diplomats that the initiative could undermine the UN Charter.

Annalena Baerbock, president of the UN General Assembly, warned that undermining the existing international order presents grave risks.

"If we question that ... we fall back (into) very, very, dark times," Baerbock told *Sky News*, noting that the UN remains the only institution with the moral and legal authority to unite all nations.

Governments also reacted largely with caution on Sunday. Hungary, led by a close ally of Trump, was the only nation to offer an unequivocal acceptance immediately.

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni said her country was "ready to do our part", though she did not specify if she was referring to the Gaza mandate or the broader global initiative. Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney said he agreed to the board for Gaza in principle, with details still to be finalised.

Rights experts and advocates have criticised the structure, suggesting that Trump overseeing the governance of foreign territories resembles a colonial arrangement.

Israel's objection

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu convened a meeting of his ruling coalition partners Sunday after objecting to the composition of a Gaza advisory panel formed by the White House, according to an official and media reports.

"The announcement regarding the composition of the Gaza Executive Board, which is subordinate to the Board of Peace, was not coordinated with Israel and runs contrary to its policy," Netanyahu's office said in a statement.

"The Prime Minister has instructed the Foreign Affairs Minister to contact the US Secretary of State on this matter," the statement added. Israel has previously objected strongly to any Turkish role in post-war Gaza.

Tiered structure

In the meantime, Washington established a hierarchical governance model for the Board of Peace and enlisted prominent American and international figures to lead efforts in regional stabilisation.

The announcement signals Phase Two of the administration's "Comprehensive Plan to End the Gaza Conflict," a 20-point roadmap backed by UN Security Council Resolution 2803. The structure includes five main bodies: Board of Peace, founding Executive Board, Gaza Executive Board, International Stabilisation Force, and a Palestinian-led administrative committee.

The "Board of Peace", led by Trump, will oversee strategies and mobilise global resources, focusing on governance, regional relations, reconstruction, investment, and large-scale funding.

The foundational layer is the founding Executive Board, a seven-member group tasked with diplomacy, large-scale funding, and infrastructure strategy. The appointed members are: US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, US Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff, Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, Tony Blair, Apollo Global Management CEO Marc Rowan, World Bank President Ajay Banga and Robert Gabriel.

Supporting this group is the Gaza Executive Board, which is responsible for managing on-the-ground operations and civil services. This board includes several members of the founding board alongside regional representatives: Steve Witkoff, Jared Kushner, Sir Tony Blair, Marc Rowan, and Nickolay Mladenov, Minister Hakan Fidan (Turkiye), Ali Al-Thawadi (Qatar), General Hassan Rashad (Egypt), Minister Reem Al-Hashimy (UAE), Cypriot-Israeli billionaire Yakir Gabay and UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Sigrid Kaag

Operational duties within the territory will be handled by the National Committee for the Administration of Gaza (NCAG), led by Ali Shaath, a civil engineer and former Palestinian Authority minister. Shaath is tasked with restoring public services, rebuilding civil institutions, and overseeing the "stabilisation of daily life" in the territory. Nickolay Mladenov, a former UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, will serve as High Representative for Gaza, acting as the primary link between the American-led Board of Peace and Shaath's NCAG.

To enforce a "terror-free environment", the White House announced the formation of the International Stabilisation Force. Major General Jasper Jeffers has been appointed commander of the force, where he will oversee demilitarisation and ensure the safe delivery of humanitarian aid.—Monitoring Desk/ Agencies